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Right Understanding

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by

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Right Understanding

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa

It has long been the custom to place on the opening page of books treating the Dhamma of the Buddha, this ancient Pali formula expressive of homage to the holy, the Exalted, the Supremely Awakened One. The old time-honoured practice is eminently commendable, for who is there worthier of the world's homage than he through whom has come to mankind of this era the knowledge of Nibbāna and the way thither?

But if it be well thus constantly to signify a grateful recognition of the bringer of the knowledge, surely it were no less well if with equal frequency mention were made of that wherein the knowledge consists, so that Teacher and Teaching might always be associated the one with the other and no opportunity given for mistake or misapprehension as to the meaning and function of either. Surely it were well if every leaflet, pamphlet, treatise, or book dealing with the Dhamma of the Buddha also bore on its first page in the boldest, most striking characters procurable, that saying in which the Buddha himself sums up the entire purport

of his Teaching: “One thing only do I teach—ill and the ending of ill.”

“One thing only do I teach,” he says. He does not say: “One thing only do I know.” Quite the contrary, for upon one occasion, as he was passing through a forest attended by a company of his disciples, he picked up a handful of leaves from the ground, and holding them out, asked his followers then with him which in their opinion was the greater, the bunch of leaves in his hand or all the remaining leaves in the wide forest. The bhikkhus, of course, replied that the remaining leaves in the forest were greater in number by far than those the Master held in his hand.

“Even so,” was his impressive reply, “is that which I have not told you far greater than that which I have told you. But what I have told you is sufficient unto deliverance—this, namely, ill, its arising, its ceasing, and the way that leads to its ceasing.” Clearly then, in any discussion of the Buddha’s Teaching, whether by friend or foe, what must always be borne in mind is that which the Teacher taught only, to the exclusion of anything else that he might and could have taught; and what he taught was just the existence of a disease and its cure, the presence of an evil and the method whereby evil might be removed, nothing more.

The first of the eight divisions of the Path that leads

to the ceasing of ill is called Right Seeing or Understanding; and in consonance with what has just been said as regards the essential nature of the Buddha's teaching, this seeing or understanding is not any one of the thousand things the restlessly busy, the actively curious and contriving minds of men are only too apt to conceive. To see and understand rightly, in the Buddha's sense of the words, does not mean, for instance, to see and understand that the world is eternal; no more does it mean to see and understand that the world is not eternal. The world may be eternal, and again it may not be eternal; however the case may be, it has no bearing on the only thing with which the Buddha is concerned—ill and its ending. Neither, in the Buddha's acceptation of the words, do seeing and understanding rightly mean seeing and understanding that the universe is finite, any more than it means seeing and understanding that it is infinite. The universe may be either the one or the other without in any way affecting the Buddha's sole business—the relief, final and complete, of suffering.

Put in its most succinct, its briefest possible form, Right Understanding may be defined as the simple understanding that everything that has arisen, without any exception, has done so in dependence upon some immediately pre-existing condition, and that with the abrogation, the removal of this condition, the thing

arising in dependence upon it is also abrogated, removed, ceases to be. Or, as the Buddha himself puts it, yet more briefly and succinctly: it is to see “that being, this is; that arising, this arises. That not being, this is not; that ceasing, this ceases.”

This, of course, is only a particularly terse way of formulating the law of causation upon which the methods of modern physical science are based, for that science does not seek for causes in any real sense of the term but only, strictly speaking, strives to ascertain the antecedent conditions under which any given phenomenon arises. The Buddha, however, is something more than a physical scientist and albeit his formula holds good of physical phenomena and of the sequence of change observable in physical matter; on his lips it embraces a wider and somewhat different purview. Concerned as he is only with ill and its ending, his definition of the law of causation is set forth only with reference to ill. This ill is ill as felt and known by each man immediately, in his own person. Hence the understanding of ill and its ceasing and the application of the law of causation thereto, means the application of the law of causation to man and his various psychical states, to all human states of feeling and emotion and mentality. In other words, it means the understanding that such and such an ill and undesirable state has arisen in dependence upon a

certain foregoing state, and that with the ceasing of the antecedent state the succeeding untoward state will also cease.

What then is the cause of ill,

... of the sum of suffering, the total mass of misery that in one form or another afflicts and distresses man? How comes it at all that man is subject to ill? What, in short, is the immediately preceding condition following upon which ill for living creatures comes to be? To this question the answer, the obvious answer, is that it is through his having been born that a man becomes subject to whatever ill may affect him; had he never been born, ill, of no matter what kind, could never befall him. A self-evident proposition. The immediately preceding condition then, in dependence upon which the entire sum of suffering arises for living creatures is birth. Seeing and understanding this, one sees and understands rightly; one is by so much possessed of Right Understanding.

But our inquiry into the arising of ill cannot stop here. That we have been born, have come into manifested life, is beyond denial the immediate cause that we are subject to all the ills that visit living

creatures, and to the final pangs of dying and parting in pain from all we loved and clung to; but whence comes it that we have been born? We and all creatures that come into life and fall heir to its ills, do so, says the Buddha, because of the existence of the huge, all-comprehending, and—so far as we can see—never-ending process of becoming that makes, and in fact is, our world. Men are born into existence so he teaches, because of the ceaseless actions of the great process of *kamma* (volitional action) and *vipāka* (moral results), an ever-present fact to be accepted with what grace we may, not to be explained away or rejected by any subtlety of reasoning, since it is the very world-process wherein we and all creatures at each moment of our existence are involved beyond possibility of denial or appeal. To see and understand that this is so is a part of Right Understanding.

But through what arises this process of becoming that in its ceaseless working brings to birth beings that suffer ill? What is the fuel that sustains this mighty fire? For to nothing so much as to a fire is to be compared the unceasing procession of cause and consequence that is our world, a fire constantly consuming and ever as constantly renewing itself, so long as is present any fuel upon which to feed. The answer is: the fuel that feeds the fire of becoming and in its burning brings to birth each new being, is

attachment. Cleaving life as cleaves the snake to the prey it has seized in its jaws. For in the Buddha's view—and, in that of all Indian thought, it may be added—the whole process of the universe of life is based upon mind, kept going by mind and its impulses. The physical is always and only the manifestation of the mental; it is merely the mental made visible. That which is seen with the physical eye, which takes place in the external world of things perceived by physical sense, is only the belated outcome of what has already taken place in the inner world of things thought of, things conceived and formed in the mind. Already, in the past, mind has clutched at and held fast to its own objectified creations, things visible, audible, gustable, and so forth; and that clinging and cleaving, now in the present takes visible form as a flesh being bound by that same cleaving upon the wheel of birth and death. It is the attachment of the mind in a former existence which has maintained the process of becoming as that process now expresses itself in the birth of a new creature. Thus, to see and understand is another part of Right Seeing and Understanding.

And where does this cleaving that feeds the flame of becoming take its rise? The Buddha's reply is: such cleaving arises through craving, through the thirst of the mind after the objects of sense. Because of this eager craving, which is even as that of the snake for

the bird it finally snatches and holds, does the mind come to seize and cleave to the things of a sense world. The seeing and understanding of this is another part of Right Seeing.

And how does this craving arise? Upon what does it depend for its coming to be? As is easily seen, craving is made possible by and arises directly from the fact that there is such a thing as sensation. Only because there is an affection of the various organs of sense by the object of sense corresponding to them, only because there is an agreeable stimulation of the sense organs by pleasurable delightful sights and sounds and odours and savours and contacts and ideas, only because of this does craving for these pleasure-giving objects arise. Thus seeing and understanding, again one is possessed of Right Seeing, of Right Understanding.

But how does the thing called sensation come to be? The answer is: sensations come to be through contact between sense organ and corresponding sense-object, whether, as in the case of touch, that contact be immediate, or only mediate, as in the case of sight, for without such contact, sensation could never arise. To see this again is to see rightly, to have Right Seeing.

And what makes possible this contact between sense and object of sense? The answer given is: contact

is possible between each of the six senses (mind being classed as the sixth sense) and their corresponding six classes of objects (ideas, corresponding with mind, making the sixth class), because of the existence of senses, of objects of sense. In the strict analysis we are here pursuing, this obvious step, for all its obviousness, may not be omitted. This understanding also belongs to Right Understanding.

But how have the six senses and their corresponding classes of object come to arise? The answer to this is: the six senses and their corresponding objects arise in dependence upon subjects and objects. That is to say: because of the existence of the great line of demarcation which separates off all that is into subject and object, there exists this lesser division—senses and things which affect those senses. The distinction of sense and sense-object, in effect, is only a variation of the larger, all-inclusive distinction, subject and object. Thus to see and understand pertains to Right Understanding.

And upon what depends the existence of the distinction, subject and object? The existence of subject and object depends upon the existence of consciousness, is the Buddha's reply. Consciousness is that which makes possible the distinction between subject and object. All consciousness is consciousness of something, hence arises the distinction between

knower and thing known, between perceiver and thing perceived—in a word, between subject and object. To see and understand this constant dependence of the fact subject and object upon the fact consciousness is another constituent of Right Seeing and Understanding.

And what is that upon which depends the arising of consciousness, the real starting point of any new individual, of any new subject, or—as the Buddha calls it, and as it ought rather to be called—subject-object, seeing that there never can be a subject without an object, just as there never is and never can be an object without a subject, subject meaning nothing more than the condition of the perceiving of an object, while object means nothing more than the condition of being perceived by a subject? The answer that the Buddha provides to this important question is: consciousness, the nucleus around which crystallises the new being that is arising, comes to be by reason of the life-affirming psychical activities of the being in this particular causal series which last appeared upon the stage of visibly manifested life. These activities, according to the Buddha, reach over from that existence into the present not in any wise as a travelling entity but rather as a communicated vibration, a transmitted impulsion that takes present shape and form—so to speak—as the consciousness of

the nascent individual of the present. To see and understand this arising of a new consciousness, a new "individual" as taking place in dependence upon, by reason of, the life-affirming activities of the "individual" which preceded it in the same line of cause and consequence—is again to see and understand rightly.

But how has this life-affirming activity come about? What is that upon which depends the arising of the activity that results in the formation of a new conscious being, and all the limitation and consequent imperfection and ill involved in the existence of such a being? To this last pertinent question the Buddha replies: life-affirming action and all it involves of subsequent ill arises through *avijja*, comes to be because of ignorance. The ignorance, however, that here is branded as the source of the sequence of ill is no vague, vast something hid in the dark womb of the past, no huge *primaeval* chaos or "old night" conceived of as mother of this or any other cosmos. Such a conception of ignorance, source of ill, compared with the Buddha's is as the fancy of a child set beside that of a grown man. The child loves the vague and the mysterious; the man prefers the definite and intelligible. And so it is not in any imagined inchoative past, but in the actual, palpitating present, the present that is always coming to be with each fresh

moment that the Buddha bids us look for the fount of things. And the ignorance with which alone he seeks to deal is ignorance as it is found here and now in living beings—ignorance of ill, ignorance of the root of ill in craving, ignorance of the ceasing of ill through the ceasing of craving, and ignorance of the path that leads to the ceasing of ill; all four of them, ignorance found where they always have been found and always are to be found, in the ever present now. Not in any kind of excogitated cosmology but in the data supplied by a closely analytic psychology does the Buddha find the light he has to throw upon the origin of imperfection we call a world. And this to see and understand, once more is to see and understand rightly.

Here the tracing out of the sequence of ill comes to an end. Further than this we cannot hope to go, for this ignorance we are. Each living creature that walks the earth is only another example of this ignorance corporealised, made visible, given local habitation and a name, and to attempt to get behind it is as vain to seek to climb a height by mounting upon one's own shoulders. Here only one thing is to be done—without delay to set to work and remove the ignorance that is productive of the undesirable thing. For where ignorance of ill is removed, where knowledge of the ill of limited, imperfect existence is fully overcome, there

all motive for life-affirming action is withered at the root, and so all such action comes to an end. And where life-affirming activity is wholly at an end, consciousness, the central nucleus of a “self” of a fresh being, no longer can arise. Where consciousness does not arise, subject and object are not to be found, for these are only the inseparable corollaries of consciousness. Where subject and object are not, the six senses and their corresponding fields of action, the six classes of sense-objects, have no existence, since they are nothing but an expression of subject and object. Where senses and sense-objects do not exist, there can be no talk of contact taking place between them. Where there is no such contact there can be no sensation; where there is no sensation of any kind, no craving, there no thirst for pleasurable sensation can arise. Where no craving for sensation arises, there can be no grasping at, no clinging to sensation, or to objects, the external agents in sensation. Where there is no grasping, no clinging to sensation or sense-objects, there the process of becoming is deprived of its motive impulsion, and so comes to an end. And where there is no more becoming, there is no more birth and no more of all that follows birth to beings born—pain, distress, disease, old age, and death. Thus in strict logical sequence does ill come to an end through the ending of ignorance, and who so sees and understands

this, he sees and understands rightly.

And the final component of Right Understanding in respect of ill is to understand that its untoward chain of succession is broken, its several links sundered and destroyed forever by the following of the excellent Eightfold Path made known by a Buddha.

The four chief elements that make up Right Understanding are thus these: the understanding that here is ill; the understanding of the sequence in which that ill arises; the understanding of the sequence in which that ill is caused to cease; and the understanding of the Path through which the sequence of ill is caused to cease. But it is not given to any of the sons of men to attain to a full and complete measure of this understanding upon the first occasion of its being put before him in words. The approach to fullness of Right Understanding can only be gradual, proceeding by slow degrees from a bare intellectual assent to the truth of its terms, to a conviction of the whole man that the case veritably is as said and the final absorption of the being of the man himself in the truth he has realised. Such absorption is really the goal towards which the Buddha's teaching points the way, the final achievement of him who follows that way to its ultimate end. Needless to say, that end can only be reached after long effort along the road that leads thither. And one of the stages along this road is that

elementary measure of Right Understanding that consists simply in understanding what is evil and what is good—that is to say, what is that course of conduct that thwarts, hinders, retards progress towards the deliverance of the mind from attachment to existential life, and what is that course that promotes, conduces to, makes for that deliverance; as also in understanding what is the root that nourishes these two modes of behaviour, from what root springs that mode of behaviour that hinders deliverance, from what root grows that which helps towards it.

Who so has attained to this initial measure of Right Seeing and Understanding, he sees that killing and stealing and lying and lasciviousness and the drinking of strong drinks are things that present obstacles and hindrances upon his path towards deliverance from ill. He understands that they clog and hamper his feet so that they scarcely can move forward upon that path: and so seeing, so understanding, he eschews and shuns them to the end that his progress towards the goal may not be uselessly delayed. Such a one also sees the root that nourishes these hindering evils, understands that it has three roots or sprouts. First: selfish craving, the desire to have and to hold for oneself alone. Second: hatred, anger, aversion to one's fellow creatures in any of the manifold forms such aversion may assume. And third: delusion, the

delusion that one is possessed of a self separate and distinct from that of every other creature, which delusion may be said to be the shoot that bears the other two, since craving to possess for self and hatred of others obviously are possible only where reigns the delusion that there exists a separate self.

And the man who has attained to this earlier measure of Right Understanding, he also understands what is good, what is that which makes for deliverance from all ill. He understands that it consists in abstaining from killing and stealing and lasciviousness and lying and the drinking of drinks that take the wits away, and shapes his life accordingly. He likewise sees and understands that the root of good, the root of all that makes for liberation, for freedom, for salvation from suffering and distress, lies in selflessness, in the cessation of all longing and striving for self alone; in love to all that lives, ceasing from every form of hatred and ill will; and finally in wisdom, in clear-eyed perception of the utter baselessness in truth or fact, of the notion of separate selfhood. He sees and understands that in this clear-eyed perception, which once attained can never be lost, lies the sure source of all deeds of kindness and good will, all deeds that have for their object never the heedless aggrandisement and gratification of self alone, but always the good, the

advantage and benefit of others simultaneously.

Such Right Understanding, when come to full fruition, becomes realisation, even as the other, is the last achievement of Buddhist effort; it too means and is final deliverance from the round of birth and death. And it also is to be realised through an approach made up of many slow and gradual stages. At first glimpsing but faintly comprehending only dimly what deeds are good and what evil, what deeds further and what delay his deliverance, a man begins, half-heartedly it may be and by no means at all times, to endeavour to do only such deeds as are good and to shun those that are evil. The effort put forth is not very great, so that result achieved is not very great either. But such as it is, it is not without its due effect. The slight degree of success in right doing thus achieved reacts upon the slight degree of Right Understanding that led to the effort made in that direction; in duly corresponding slight measure, it strengthens and clarifies that understanding, makes what was little a tiny degree less little, makes the little to be somewhat more. And now with Right Understanding thus in some small measure become clearer and stronger than it was before, the next effort of the man towards good and away from evil is by so much a less half-hearted, a more vigorous and determined effort, and hence achieves a greater degree of success. This success

again reacts upon the understanding so as to clarify and strengthen it yet more, and again the understanding thus endowed with this fresh accession of clarity and strength makes possible a still higher degree of effort after right conduct. The whole procedure is like that of the cleansing of hands or feet. "As hand washes hand and foot washes foot," says a sutta, "so Right Conduct is purified by Right Understanding and Right Understanding by Right Conduct." Thus on and on these twain, conduct and understanding, by the mutual strengthening influence of each upon the other, gain depth and fullness in increasingly larger degrees until at length the highest possible degree of both is reached, the supreme summit of Right Understanding attained, and the mind delivered, "with the deliverance that comes of wisdom;" that which in its feeble, elementary beginnings was the first step upon the Path, having become in its final perfection the last step, the winning to the goal.

Thus from lowliest levels does the Path lead on to the loftiest heights. Thus may each man just where he is, and as he is, begin to take those steps which, only maintained and persisted in, will bring him at length whither all the great and noble of the earth have made their way. For they too once stood where we now stand in the climb up the mound of perfection. But by

patient, continuous endeavour they have attained; and even so we also may attain through the perfection of Right Understanding.

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